Saint-Exupéry’s Geography Lesson: 
Art and Science in the Creation and 
Cultivation of Landscape Values

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Abstract. Saint-Exupéry’s geography lesson is critical of official, generalized geographies that are irrelevant to lifeworlds, humane values, and spirituality. Geography is seen in the context of the dehumanization of landscapes and lives by Cartesian-inspired science. In answer, the essay argues for art, as developed in arts-and-letters humanism of the Renaissance, as an equal but separate path to “truth” in humanistic geography. It further argues that the sources for human values that humanistic geographers should endeavor to transform into landscape values are found in the subjective, imaginative creations of modern literary-artistic humanists. The critical focus for such studies is the condition of the individual human being in the contemporary landscape. Humanization of cultural landscapes, in the sense of a humane, “enlightened anthropocentrism” is seen as equal in importance to ecological perspectives. Three major research themes are outlined.

Key Words: Cartesian science, art and science, arts-and-letters humanism, geography as art, humane values, humanistic geography, the human condition, civilization, post-modernism, spirituality in ordinary landscapes.

There is nothing quite so modern as a page of any of the pre-Socratic physicists, where science and poetry are still the same thing. . . .

Guy Davenport (1981, 21)

. . . for in art as in nature no two things exactly repeat each other.

William J. Barrett (1984, 142)

. . . l’explication orphique de la terre, qui est le seul devoir du poète . . .

Mallarmé, in Sewell (1960, 280)

In recent decades geography, specifically “humanistic geography,” has been moving in the direction of the humanities. Instead of being strictly a science, it is beginning to take in certain aspects of art, thereby to develop means to address human subjectivity and values. Rather than to fully embrace the humanities, however, the general tendency has been to stay on their borders. Occasional sallies are made into the humanities, but the home base remains firmly in the social and physical sciences. There is considerable debate about the unification of art and science, but so far that has not really been effected. To be sure, in the process, humanistic geographers have become known for their work beyond the borders of their discipline, but only in a limited sense.

It would appear that for as long as humanistic geographers stay within the borders of science, there will always be certain limits to what can be achieved in the humanities, especially regarding humanistic attitudes toward cultural and “natural” landscapes. This essay explores the idea that geographers embrace the humanities, or more specifically, literary-artistic humanism, as a parallel yet separate domain of inquiry, in order to make substantial contributions in the realm of humane values in the environment. A number of research themes are suggested. The essay begins with the story of a lesson in geography.

A Geography Lesson

It was in 1926, on the eve of his maiden flight from Montaudran, France, to Casablanca, Morocco, as a mail pilot for the Latécoère Com-
pany (Cate 1970) that Saint-Exupéry was taught a special lesson in geography (1939, 16–17):

But what a strange lesson in geography I was given! Guillaumet did not teach Spain to me, he made the country my friend. He did not talk about provinces, or peoples, or livestock. Instead of telling me about Guadix, he spoke of three orange-trees on the edge of town: “Beware of those trees. Better mark them on the map.” And those three orange-trees seemed to me thenceforth higher than the Sierra Nevada . . . .

The details that we drew up from oblivion, from their inconceivable remoteness, no geographer had been concerned to explore. Because it washed the banks of great cities, the Ebro River was of interest to map-makers. But what had they to do with that brook running secretly through the water-weeds to the west of Motril, that brook nourishing a mere score or two of flowers?

“Careful of that brook: it breaks up the whole field. Mark it on your map.” Ah, I was to remember that serpent in the grass near Motril! It looked like nothing at all, and its faint murmur sang to no more than a few frogs; but it slept with one eye open. . . .

Saint-Exupéry then tells of the map that he created for finding his way around Spain and surviving the perils of piloting a small airplane in the 1920s:

Little by little, under the lamp, the Spain of my map became a sort of fairyland. The crosses I marked to indicate safety zones and traps were so many buoys and beacons. I charted the farmer, the thirty sheep, the brook. And, exactly where she stood, I set a buoy to mark the shepherdess forgotten by the geographers.

The playfulness of the last sentence is typical of Saint-Exupéry’s prose, but it masks the deadly seriousness of Guillaumet’s lesson: “You think the meadow empty, and suddenly bang! there are thirty sheep in your wheels” (1939, 17).

Here is a remembrance of a pilot’s geography lesson and in turn a lesson for geographers. The irony of the forgotten shepherdess on the hillside is exquisite. Saint-Exupéry has purposefully juxtaposed individual sensory, pragmatic, and poetic encounters with landscapes against the generalities and abstractions of geographers, which he clearly finds meaningless and insignificant. It illustrates a problem that still vexes geographers in their work with the earth’s phenomena, that is, the seemingly unbridgeable dualism of the general, the abstract, the aggregate, the nomothetic, versus the specific, concrete, individual, idiosyncratic, and poetic. Or as Lowenthal distinguishes it, the dualism between “the world of general discourse” and “the palpable present, the everyday life of man on earth” (Lowenthal 1967, 72). On one level, it is the dualism between science and art; on another, between subject and object, the observer and phenomena observed, lifeworld and the world of knowledge. Saint-Exupéry implies that the geographer drives a wedge between these facets, in order to write abstract, official treatises.

Saint-Exupéry’s contempt for the geographer’s craft ran deep, for he was to condemn it even more strongly in The Little Prince as a discipline aloof from the world and from human things that matter (such as the ephemeral beauty of a flower): “The geographer is much too important to go loafing about. He does not leave his desk,” wrote Saint-Exupéry, adding that geography books only record “matters of consequence” (1971, 64–65). The geographer is depicted as a detached, emotionless observer. But his negative view of geography was part of a broader condemnation that he made of the modern world as it was unfolding during the twenties, thirties, and early forties. Almost to the day that he disappeared in his Lightning while on a reconnaissance flight over occupied France, Saint-Exupéry questioned the abstraction and bureaucratization of human life through economic and technologic progress made possible by Cartesian science. He admired that science: “To seek to grasp the world by means of an efficient conceptual system is part of the greatness of man’s spirit,” he wrote. But it is also man’s downfall “for he believes in it too much.” That unquestioning belief had made it possible to create vast economic, bureaucratic, and technical systems that were sweeping asunder all that was humane, noble, and spiritual in particular places, people, and customs (1986, 132–39). Saint-Exupéry was describing a process of dehumanization of lives and landscapes, which, much later in the century, Berman characterized as modernity, created “by the immense bureaucratic organizations that have the power to control and often to destroy all communities” (1983, 13). Geography, with its quest for the general and the conceptual, for what it considered important, was clearly symbolic of that process, if not an outright part of the problem.

It would be easy to ignore Saint-Exupéry’s sarcasm toward geography as pique born of a bad experience—perhaps with a pedantic teacher. What gives Saint-Exupéry’s criticism of
geography, and of the modern era, particular power is the fact that he was not a disengaged bystander but an active participant in both arenas. He observed geographic aspects of far-flung landscapes and wrote wonderful evocations and philosophic musings about their significance. His interpretations of the world from the air are among the most vivid and lyric that have been written. As an aviator in the fledgling mail services, he contributed to the unfolding age of modern technology. As André Gide wrote of Night Flight, he admired “this work not only on its literary merit but for its value as a record of realities” (1932, xi).

More important is the fact that Saint-Exupéry’s was the vision of a classic humanist. Like the geographer of Meinig’s later calling, he was interested in ordinary lives and landscapes, in the proverbial “here and now,” and in probing “deeply into what it all means” (Meinig 1971, 1979, 1983, 325). As an artist and intellectual engaged in acts in the world and acts of creativity, Saint-Exupéry tells what he thinks the world is, what it is becoming, and what it ought to be. In Saint-Exupéry’s writings we find the seeds of ideas for more humane geographies and landscapes.

Answer to Saint-Exupéry’s Geography Lesson: Literary-Artistic Humanism

Saint-Exupéry’s critique of the dehumanization of everyday life in the science of geography offers a powerful challenge to the epistemological mainstream in the discipline. It also begs for a response that will, on the one hand, address the general role of humanism in geography and, on the other, make a determined effort to incorporate the perspectives of art—or more precisely literary, artistic, or non-scientific humanism—into the work of geographers, and do so not merely as an embellishment or source of data for scientific research, but as a path of truth and wisdom in its own right, equal in value, but separate from the truths of science. Such, at least, is the principal goal of this paper.

One major obstacle to the incorporation of literary and artistic humanism in modern geography is that various misunderstandings prevail in the discipline, and for that matter in society as a whole, about the nature of literary and artistic humanism itself (it will be called simply humanism, unless otherwise specified). To be sure, many efforts have been made to embrace humanism, in the manner of the humanities, into geography. There is at least an intuitive sense that therein lies the key to humane values in the study of geography and, ultimately too, in the principal subject of the geographer’s attentions, the landscape. But substantive results are as yet lacking, and not least of all because the tendency has been mainly to look at humanism from the outside in—or as Meinig thinks, to stay in those areas of the humanities that border social science (1983). In the process, little actual headway has been made in integrating humanism into the field, a failure that is perhaps best demonstrated by the continuing but, as yet, largely uneventful effort of many so-called “humanistic geographers” to develop a framework that would mediate between subject and object, observer and observed, art and science, Verstehen und Wissen.

But there is another way to view this issue. If one assumes there is no practical paradigmatic solution to the art-science dichotomy—at least not within the preferred mode of linear scientific discourse (Dardell was probably right in thinking that geography will always be “stretched between knowledge and existence”—Gregory 1978, 124), then the fundamental need for rapprochement advocated by Ley and Samuels (1978) can also be questioned. Attempts to find an epistemological tool that would successfully mediate between art and science, lived and conceptual realities, have so far resulted mainly in abstract dialogues among a small group of cognoscenti. Those debates may have an intellectual sprightliness and may inform other fields of the epistemological struggles in geography, but they also heighten geography’s failure to contribute significantly to a deeper understanding of human life in the modern world—the very criticism made by Saint-Exupéry! Nevertheless, there is an implicit solution in this failure, and a solution too to Saint-Exupéry’s challenge. That solution lies in not treating the works of literary-artistic humanists from the standpoint of the social sciences, but rather in their own terms. The relevance of this point is underscored in the following evocation by Alistair MacLeod of the art and skill of deep-shaft mining (1988, 220–21):

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I have always wished that my children could see me at my work. That they might journey down with me in the dripping cage to the shaft’s bottom or walk the eerie tunnels of the drifts that end in walls of staring stone. And that they might see how articulate we are in the accomplishment of what we do. That they might appreciate the perfection of our drilling and the calculation of our angles and the measuring of our powder, and that they might understand that what we know through eye and ear and touch is of a finer quality than any information garnered by the most sophisticated of mining engineers with all their elaborate equipment.

I would like to show them how professional we are and how, in spite of the chill and the water and the dark and the danger, there is perhaps a certain eloquent beauty to be found in what we do. . . . the beauty of motion on the edge of violence. . . . Few of us get to show our children what we do on national television; we offer only the numbness and silence by itself. Unable either to show or tell.

The passage emphasizes the mute yet poetic subjectivity and artistry of human acts that pass unnoticed unless there is someone who has the understanding and ability to bring them forth into the light of day. When they choose to illuminate the human condition (instead of creating art-for-art’s sake), fine writers like MacLeod, and poets and artists of all kinds, enlarge human perception, knowledge, and overall consciousness of the world. As Gaston Bachelard writes of the impact of Claude Monet on aesthetics, “the water lilies of the Ile-de-France have been more beautiful, more splendid” from the moment that Monet first looked at a water lily (1971, 3–7). And inherent in all human creations, scientific and artistic, is the possibility that a culture will change to a greater or lesser extent, because of them.

The point is that there is a richness to the diversity of views which art and science separately provide, and it is possible to conceive that geographers might themselves become full-fledged literary and artistic humanists without emulating the paradigms of the natural and social sciences. In short, one path to an emancipation from the art-science dichotomy is to move directly to one side, not to science but to art.

One takes the initial step in that direction by recognizing the intrinsic nature and workings of humanism, especially the criteria of “truth” and universality in the original intentions of Renaissance humanism and in its current, largely non-academic manifestations. Through that understanding lies the path toward answering Saint-Exupéry’s criticism and to making geography a humane discipline that has something to say not only about structures and processes of the varied earth’s phenomena under study, but also about the human condition—past, present, and future—of individuals in the modern landscape. This latter function of geography can be cultivated by bringing the accumulated wisdom of humanism into congruence with theoretical and practical issues of the environment.

Although humanistic values are the common property of us all, there is a largely neglected fount of humane concerns and values in poetry, literature, the arts, and philosophy that begs for attention. Indeed, the twentieth century is one of the more fecund and unique eras in that regard. Literary and artistic imaginations, no less than those of scientists, have been inordinately inventive due to liberation from dogmas (or because of them) and because of the shock of modernity. The powers of literary-artistic imaginations have been stretched to their limits during this century by the creation of a world in which traditions and “lessons” of the past have become increasingly irrelevant; where “modernity,” brought forth especially by science and technology, but also by art, literature, and philosophy, has required new symbols and new intellectual and emotional languages; where new technological and political orders have brought war and atrocity to heretofore unknown levels (which are yet to be fully assimilated into human consciousness—Milosz 1983). As Stephen Spender has written of modern literature, writers had “to reinvent the world and all its values within their art” (1963, 17). The possible exception to all this is the so-called post-modernist phase and its dearth of imagination (Kearney, in Buttimer 1988a).

Just as geographers have contributed to the understanding of economic and ecologic systems, geographers can contribute to humanizing the environment by humane, nature-respecting values (a recurrent theme in the writings of Glacken 1965, 1966, 1970a, b). The geographer then becomes “a man [or woman] of culture,” as the Renaissance architect was envisioned by Leon Battista Alberti (Argan 1969, 27)—an individual who encompasses cultural values and nurtures their expression in the landscape and in human lives. This might be accomplished directly through participation in landscape creation, or indirectly, through imaginative intellectual and artistic creations (in
the broadest sense) that inform students and professionals—planners, designers, landscape architects, architects, and anyone else who is responsible for the environment and has the inclination to address critical issues.

It is true that many applied geographers and their counterparts in urban and regional planning, in countries such as Canada, Sweden, Germany, the Soviet Union, and elsewhere, are frequently involved in the creation of landscapes. By and large their task is to develop effective socioeconomic structures, which, at best, may have built into them certain harmonies with nature. But their effort is not centered on linking humanistic values, as discussed in this paper, with physical landscape realities.

One notable exception is worth mention:

Marwyn Samuels (perhaps following the dictates of his "Biography of Landscape," 1979) initiated and directed the design, financing, and construction of the first full-scale, authentic classical Chinese garden to be built in North America, the Sun Yatse Park and Suzhou Classical Garden in the city of Vancouver, British Columbia. Samuels was responsible for the idea and for implementing the removal of two acres of old, city-owned bus garages and parking lots, private warehouses, etc. in a run-down neighborhood on the edge of the city's Chinatown district, and the creation of a unique "green space" that is now a major park and museum in the heart of downtown Vancouver. Completed in 1985 with the help of the People's Republic of China, the garden not only serves the ordinary people of Vancouver, but also symbolizes the contribution of Chinese immigrants to Canada, and symbolizes the recent normalization of relations between China and the West. . . . Samuels drew both on a humanistic vision of the landscape and on his expertise as a China specialist in geography (Brunn 1989).

There are no doubt other instances where geographers have been involved in a significant way in the process of translating humanistic values into landscapes. But geographers can also express their unique love of the earth and its varied phenomena, human and physical, in intellectual and artistic creations that would broaden and deepen humane attitudes and perceptions of landscapes and nature (see, for example, Tuan 1989, Romney 1987). What is to keep geographers from writing creative essays, novels, or poems, as for example, historians and professors of literature and of philosophy have done (but see Ralph H. Brown 1943)? Or for developing artistic skills in the visual and plastic arts? Is it too far-fetched to suggest that the cultivation of sketching and painting skills be a part of the training for the serious student of landscape, as it is in the training of architects?

The creative use of film and video is certainly worth exploring. At the very least, if the talent and inclination are lacking for outright creation, there is need to recognize the geographer in artists such as Saint-Exupéry, Selma Lagerlöf (1920), Siegfried Lenz (1981), Barry-Holstun Lopez (1986), John Steinbeck (1939), Douglas Unger (1984), and many others.

The point is that when environmental qualities are at issue, the nobler creations of human nature should be accorded a similar stature to those of nature. Geographers ought to reach, as Rilke wrote of the modern era and human imagination, "into the common depth, where the roots of all growing things drink" (Rilke 1965, 522). Moreover, they ought at least to tap the deeper roots of their own literary and artistic imaginations to search out and to find the spirit of their landscapes.

This essay is, then, a preliminary exploration of that possibility through the example of Saint-Exupéry. In doing so, it first looks to Saint-Exupéry's ideas about the humane qualities of landscapes and explores the role of poetic and intellectual imaginations in the creation of those qualities. And, in conclusion, the essay presents themes for the study of humane values, especially in areas of great concern to humanists, and therefore also to humanist geographers—the condition of the human being in the modern world and the discord between internal and external landscapes.

**Spirituality and Landscape**

. . . it is true that geography has been very useful to me. At a glance I can distinguish China from Arizona. If one gets lost in the night, such knowledge is valuable.

Saint-Exupéry, *The Little Prince* (1971, 5)

Saint-Exupéry's geography lesson evokes an alarmed concern for the rapid dehumanization of modern lives and landscapes. To better understand his concern, one needs to know something about Saint-Exupéry's life. He was an unusual individual who, unlike many other litterati and artists in the Western cultural tradition, combined life of the intellect with a life of action. He best expressed that unity in a plea he made to an American commander during
the Second World War. At the age of forty-three, Saint-Exupéry asked permission to fly combat missions, so that all he had written would not lose its power of persuasion for a lack of commitment (1986). The unity of thought and act permeated, albeit not always comfortably, many aspects of his life. He loved both the old and the new: old, organic traditions and new mechanical innovations; he admired the poetic and the ambiguous alongside the scientific and precise.

Saint-Exupéry’s experiences as a pilot seriously challenged this sense of unity. He was first engaged by the romance of the machine and the new vision of the earth and its people that it opened up. Later the rapid mechanization of human life appalled him.

As an early mail pilot during the nineteen-twenties, he lived in two worlds: on the one hand, in an older world in which the use of the senses was critical to survival and, on the other hand, in a new age in which the milieu was increasingly apprehended secondhand—through the intervening devices of a highly mechanized era. His cockpit instruments, though primitive by today’s standards, were already pointing towards the onrushing era of mechanistic models of space and time. But the ability to read the environment through the senses, from canal courses to railway alignments to a shepherdess on a hillside, remained critical. Although their airplanes could navigate the featureless space above a sea of clouds over the Pyrenees (to do this was indeed thought to be dashing), the pilots were taught to dive down through the clouds, even if it meant flying at treetop level. They would say that eternity began below those clouds (Cate 1970). He loved the airplanes he flew. His praise of the machine as an organic extension of the human being is indeed rare among major writers of this century. As he was to write with a cool matter-of-factness, “Once again the pilot in full flight experienced neither giddiness nor any thrill; only the mystery of metal turned to living flesh” (1932, 9).

For Saint-Exupéry, the airplane represented the best results of a technology based on Cartesian science that was transforming the world. In that sense, the application of Cartesian science had produced admirable human accomplishments. But while it had radically altered the human condition, it had hardly benefitted human values and human morality, save perhaps for work in the natural sciences (1986, 135). Many human-oriented values were being lost in the wave of increasing mechanization. The greatest loss by far was that of spirituality—not spirituality in the context of formal religions but in the general sense of the ineffable and mysterious, of transcendence attached to things and events. Saint-Exupéry argued ontologically for spirituality and the mind as the two essential aspects of human nature. Moreover, he believed that life of the spirit is higher than life of the mind, that it “alone satisfies man” and that it is indeed impossible to live without the “poetry, color, or love” that are expressions of spirituality (1986, 134–35). Saint-Exupéry was speaking of creations in the realm of emotions and subjectivity. Science obviously could not create the spirituality embodied in poetry, love, or color because its domain is reason, not emotion, even if some of its most remarkable discoveries may have originated by, so to speak, “divine” inspiration.

The above dualism of mind and spirit can be easily dismissed as yet another version of the familiar Kantian or Emersonian metaphysics of human nature. What resonates in it, for the humanist geographer, is Saint-Exupéry’s finding of spirituality in aspects of everyday, ordinary lives and cultural landscapes, and his analysis of the fate of that spirituality in the mechanistic landscapes that he saw unfolding before him. As he outlines it, spirituality develops through the quest of being above and beyond materials (Cate 1970). Once again the emphasis is not on religion. Although religion may certainly help in the quest, the path is through life itself—through a little “morsel of eternity” gained by a succession of ordinary acts in ordinary landscapes. The pilot of Night Flight sees the result of such acts on an Argentine plain as he descends toward the aerodrome through the Argentine dusk (1932, 6):

> These little towns, where he lived an hour, their gardens girdled by old walls over which he passed, seemed something apart and everlasting. Now the village was rising to meet the plane, opening out toward him. And there, he mused, were friendliness and gentle girls, white napery spread in quiet homes; all that is slowly shaped toward eternity.

In the same vein, the love of “one’s own home . . . is part of the spiritual life, like the village fête and the cult of the dead” (1986, 135).

As in the geography lesson with which this essay began, spiritual meaning is found in seizing
the particular from the general. Thus Saint-Exupéry tells of discovering meaning in grass, olive trees, and sheep when his car breaks down in North Africa during the war and he is forced to travel by cart. The experience makes him realize that (1986, 133),

Those olive trees were no longer just so many trees along the road, whizzing past at 130 kilometers an hour. I now saw them in their natural rhythm, slowly making olives. The sheep no longer merely served to reduce one's speed; they came alive. They ate and gave wool and the grass once again had a meaning, since they grazed on it.

For Saint-Exupéry spirituality was but the most important aspect of a broader idea of humanity which entailed satisfying aspirations of the human being for the poetic or the "merely human" (1986, 134), by which he meant daily life with a sense of an eternal rhythm. An unmailed war letter reveals the fabric of his thought (1986, 133-34):

And so I'm profoundly sad . . . for my generation, which lacks all human substance . . . . Consider how much effort was put into satisfying people's spiritual, poetic, or merely human aspirations [in the past]. Today, when we are more dried out than any brick, we smile at this naïveté—the costumes, banners, songs, music, victories [there are no victories nowadays, nothing that conveys the poetic impact of Austerlitz; there remain only phenomena to be absorbed, slowly or quickly]. All lyricism sounds ridiculous. People refuse to be awakened to any kind of spiritual life. They carry on [conscientiously] a kind of conveyor-belt activity . . . . The sickness does not lie in any absence of individual talent, but in the way people are forbidden, under pain of ridicule, to turn to the great refreshing myths. . . . This is the century of advertising, of the Bedaux system [a time study method used to determine wage rates], of dictatorships . . . . I hate this age with all my might. In it humanity is dying of thirst.

Having expressed general outrage, Saint-Exupéry explains that the "bonds of affection that men feel for mankind or for things" are weak because they lack "tenderness and solidity." Thus being away from one's home is no longer of any great consequence because home has ceased to be a significant place. It is a mere "bundle of habits" (1986, 136-37):

In this age of divorce, one divorces oneself just as easily from things. Refrigerators are interchangeable—and homes, too, if they represent nothing more than a bundle of habits—so also with a wife, a religion, or a political party. One cannot even be unfaithful: There is nothing to be unfaithful to . . . where are we heading . . . in this age of universal bureaucracy? Robot-man alternating between . . .

the conveyor belt and gin rummy—stripped of all creative power, incapable of creating, from the depths of the village, a new dance or a new song, spoon-fed with a ready-made, standardized culture as one feeds hay to cattle. That is what man is today.

Crucial in this critique of modern society is Saint-Exupéry's idea of a remedy.

It must be pointed out that, in reference to Saint-Exupéry's ideas, I have explicitly avoided the utopian and political notions that he advanced in his last work, *Citadelle* (French title) or *The Wisdom of the Sands* (1950). It represents an unfinished, posthumously published manuscript in which Saint-Exupéry clearly had not reconciled contradictory philosophies. In it he advocated a benevolent authoritarianism—no doubt the result of his despair over the failure of democracies to cope with modern malaise.

Saint-Exupéry believed that it was too much to ask of the economist, mathematician or the engineer, and he certainly meant geographers as well, to entrust society to their safe-keeping (Cate 1970). These individuals could not return to human beings the spiritual significance, a "spiritual anxiety" that they had lost through technology and the bureaucratization of life (Saint-Exupéry 1986, 134). That could only come from ancient or humble communities, or from those individuals of the modern era who kept alive interest in such matters, that is, active people of literary and artistic imaginations who searched for and created meaning in the ties that bind humans to the phenomenal world. Through them humanity could regain a spiritual significance in things and events in the cultural landscape.

Saint-Exupéry's plea for spirituality and morality in human life and landscape came during the violence of World War II. He was concerned less with the immediate enemy, Nazism, than with what would happen after the war was won ("Once the German problem has been dealt with, the real problems will become apparent" [1986, 135]). He wanted to make certain that human life and landscape be framed as much by the poetics of arts-and-letters humanism as by Cartesian science. And that is indeed his geography lesson for geographers.

**Humanism in Geography**

Saint-Exupéry was self-conscious about living at a time of rapid change in spatial and temporal
relations. His self-consciousness was that of the literary and artistic humanist in the classic sense of that term, that is, the worldly humanism of the Renaissance—the humanism that culminated in the works of Shakespeare, Cervantes, Rabelais, and Michel de Montaigne—the humanism of the sixteenth century, when minds in a country like France were “as yet unravished by the eloquence of René Descartes” (Cate 1970, 554). It was also the humanism that informed the geographical works of Alexander von Humboldt, who, inspired by both art and science, used the perspectives of both as mutually reinforcing strategies for the study of nature and the human mind in nature (Humboldt 1844, Bunkšé 1981).

Saint-Exupéry is of course not alone in his Renaissance humanism. Among others, Rilke voiced similar humanist concerns early in the century (1965) as did Jaspers in the thirties (1957), Ortega y Gasset (1957), and Heidegger in the forties (Heidegger later renounced it—1975, 1977), Gaston Bachelard in the fifties (1969), Alberto Moravia in the sixties (1966), and Czeslaw Milosz today (1983)—just to mention a few. But theirs is a less worldly, more detached humanism. Heidegger’s vision is abstract, disembodied, and for all practical purposes, it verges on a Cartesian vision of the world (see especially his “Building Dwelling Thinking” [sic.], 1975). This latter humanism differs from Saint-Exupéry’s in that it is predominantly esoteric or academic (although Milosz [1983] has made a serious plea for modern poets to rejoin the human family). Moreover, humanism as a whole is largely divorced from the sphere of action and has little influence in the so-called “real world”—a world dominated by scientific or rational humanism (Relph 1981). Saint-Exupéry was convinced that humanity could achieve humane values only by embracing humanism as an active force in human perceptions and acts, a force of history and geography. By extension, the humanist must both observe the human scene and be an active participant in it.

The humanist tradition as represented by Saint-Exupéry is not entirely absent from geography. Before the institutionalization of the quest for knowledge into distinct fields of learning, there was an older tradition of humanism in association with geography (Buttimer 1988b). From Hippocrates, Posidonius, and Lucretius in antiquity, to Bodin, Buffon, Kant (Glacken 1967), Herder, and Humboldt in the early modern era, geography was both an art and a science, a part of broader speculations about the phenomenal world. In the twentieth century, there has been an effort to once again broaden geography and its perspectives. Carl Sauer allowed for subjective if not outright poetic evocations of landscapes (1965) and John Kirkland Wright emphasized the role of imagination and art in geography. Indeed Wright argued for arts-and-letters humanism in geography (1966, 87):

All science should be scholarly, but not all scholarship can be rigorously scientific. Scholarship, moreover, embraces not only the natural sciences and social studies but also the humanities—the arts and letters—inquiring no less into the world of subjective experience and imaginative expression than into that of external reality.

As the current era of quantification was unfolding, Clarence Glacken made an explicit plea for the study of concrete human experiences of the everyday world. He insisted that the relationship between man and nature “has an enforced concrete and describable earthiness about it which resists a severe divorcement from detail and diversity.” He may have been mistaken, however, in assuming that just as quantification envelopes “vast fields of the social sciences . . . the non-quantitative, normative, concrete, descriptive aspects will also increase in importance” (1966, 357–58). More recently, Lowenthal and Prince have argued for the study of positive and transcendental aspects of landscape experience as revealed in the arts and imaginative literature (1976). The study of geographic themes in literature has indeed become a vital subfield through the efforts of such individuals as Pocock, Tuan, and others (Pocock 1981; Tuan 1976a, 1978). Anne Buttimer has addressed the issues of values and creativity in geography, including the idea of a dialogue between its disparate parts (1974, 1981, 1983a, b). The most explicit expression of humanism has been Meinig’s call for geography to become an art and for broadening the study of the world beyond description, measurement, and analysis, to probe “deeply into what it all means” (1983, 325).

Still, on the whole geographers have been reluctant to embrace outright the arts-and-letters humanism of Saint-Exupéry. Attempts to develop “humanistic” geography in recent decades betray this reluctance. In an effort to address the subjective aspects of human experi-
ence—meaning, intent, and values—geography has begun to examine the arts, the philosophies of existentialism and phenomenology, as well as the idea of realism (among others, Tuan 1971, 1976b, 1982; Buttimer 1976, 1981; Entrikin 1976; Ley and Samuels 1978; Samuels 1981; Rees 1982a, b; Gibson 1981). The majority of geographers, however, tend to treat subjectivity as representing yet another data set subject to generalization and reduction. In the past, most humanistically-oriented research in geography has represented an inclination toward achieving nomothetic goals, where the specific or idiosyncratic supports those goals. Marwyn Samuels comes closest to arts-and-letters humanism by suggesting geographers look to individual culpability through landscape biographies, and by addressing individual experiences of major upheavals of this century in their spatial context (1979, 1981). In the final analysis, his intent is to use individual cases in order to draw general contours of "shared contexts" (1981, 124-32). It is perhaps not an altogether fair assertion, but the conclusion has to be drawn that humanistic geographers tend to value primarily Cartesian science in their study of the phenomenal world.

This is not surprising for Cartesian science represents, after all, the dominant tradition of Western scholarship in this century. But, as Saint-Exupéry reasoned, such a perspective is inherently flawed. While it may find a vaccine for smallpox or create hybrid corn, it cannot address humane values of spirituality and transcendence—values that require not a reduction but an expansion of the human experience (as Gaston Bachelard [1969] realized when he began to study imagination). That intention is found in literary and artistic humanism, a body of thought and creation that developed its fundamental characteristics in Classical Antiquity, came into full bloom during the Renaissance, and which continues to inform the consciousness of many twentieth-century literati and artists. Understanding those fundamental characteristics is critical for a truly humanistic geography—a geography which embraces art, in the sense of all the arts, as an equal of science in establishing "truths" and informing human activities in the environment. That, however, is the subject of a separate essay.

**Some Research Themes**

A rich field is open to geographers who would endeavor to bring the values and perspectives of humanism into the theory and praxis of forming and cultivating—in the original sense of nurturing, caring for, and cherishing—the cultural landscape in all its varied dimensions. There is a palpable need to frame knowledge of the earth and human relationships to it in more subtle and sensitive humanistic terms, to counteract the soulless abstractions of the industrial-economic system or the meaningless eclectics of post-modernist culture (Kearney, in Buttimer 1988a). Because the forces of technology and the bureaucratization of life and landscape are ever accelerating in their impact, the need for humanistic values is greater now than it was even in Saint-Exupéry's day. By way of further illustration, the three themes that follow address that need in the context of modern geography. Students of art, literature, poetry, and the like will find much familiar ground here.

**Impact of Modern Culture on the Human Being**

The first and most prominent humanistic theme is the problem of alienation from the land and in society. How does the modern milieu, its landscape, and technocracy affect human beings in the short run, and by implication, in the long run of human evolution? Saint-Exupéry, Ortega y Gasset (1957), Milosz (1983), Sylvia Plath (1983), and Barrett (1979, 1984) are the immediate inspirations for the theme, the main geographical dimensions of which address the issue of the relationship between the interior life and landscape of people, to their specific situations and to the material conditions of the world. Discontinuities (or alienation) between individuals and their milieu are a facet of modern life, and the humane letters and arts abound with illustrations. Here too, then, is a place where the geographer's interest in the earth as the home of the human being can make an important contribution in bringing humanistic attitudes, perceptions, and values into her or his interpretation of landscapes.
In that regard, a most challenging task is a comprehensive study of how modern literary-artistic creations reveal attitudes toward nature, human nature, and culture. There are precedents for such study in the realm of culture-nature relationships, both within and without geography. Most notable in geography are the works of Humboldt and Glacken. Humboldt’s history of the feeling for nature (Naturgefühl) was an important early contribution to the study of affective ties with the environment (Humboldt 1844, Bunkšé 1981, Stoddart 1986). Glacken’s history of attitudes toward culture and nature from antiquity through the eighteenth century is the definitive work in this area by a geographer (1967). But the relationship between culture and cultural landscapes and the individual human being is a subject geographers have largely avoided.

Cultural or Value Relativism

Another second major theme for a more humanistic geography relates to the issue of cultural relativism, about which I shall have more to say in a subsequent essay. For the moment, it suffices to note that this issue has been and remains a prominent theme in all humanistic literature from Montaigne and Montesquieu, through Nietzsche and Freud, into modern existentialism and post-modernism.

A lack of relativism in the treatment of the world was one of the problems Saint-Exupéry had with geography. To illuminate the full features of the relativistic situation of the human being in the modern milieu is one of the major issues in humanizing environmental thought and action. As a problem of modern life and secular consciousness, relativism has received much more attention within the literary-artistic culture than in the social sciences. It therefore awaits the geographer’s contribution. Relativistic views of the world will be difficult to accommodate within the fairly absolutist structures of human systems with which geographers deal (such as housing or economic systems), but a dialogue between the two views must begin if there is to be a humanistic geography that addresses human values other than materialism.

Loss of an Immutable Cosmos

Loss of an immutable cosmos, and of the tangible ritualistic and material landscape symbols that historically went with that cosmos, is a problem of modern human consciousness that informs many subsidiary themes. There is a long and complex history of that loss, namely of the erosion of anthropomorphic projections into the universe, into earthly nature and places, and in the undermining of the idea of a grand design and teleology of nature by Count Buffon, Voltaire, and Humboldt (Glacken 1967). Losing an immutable, structured, and significant cosmos has meant a concomitant loss of a sense of place and of the values that went with it. Finding orientation and meaning in the ensuing chaos of a universe “explained” by relativity (not to be confused with cultural or value relativism) and quantum physics is one of the themes of modern literary-artistic culture.

There are other lesser, but by no means less significant ideas of literary-artistic humanism that ask for the geographer’s attention. Among them is the issue of the so-called isolated consciousness that Goethe first illuminated in Werther (Peckham 1962). Today, this expresses itself as the important theme of human isolation from the milieu (an issue addressed in the abstract by Yi-Fu Tuan in Segmented Worlds and Self, 1982). There is the problem of “naming” (in the Nietzschean sense) the things, processes, events, and spatial configurations brought forth through science, technology, and the increasing dominance of mass culture. In other words, the problem of internalizing and humanizing such change, a major leitmotiv in many modern literary and poetic works, from Rilke (1965) to Milosz (1983). At issue for humanists is the seemingly irreconcilable dichotomy of personal, experiential knowledge and official knowledge of social and scientific constructions. Especially important in this context is the impact of science and technology, and what Milosz calls the pollution of the mind by pseudoscience (Milosz 1983), on the individual’s sense of place and sense of importance in the world. Lastly, there is the human’s relationship to temporal dimensions—to the syncretism of the present, past, and future in a relativistic
setting. Lowenthal has already prepared the way here with *The Past Is a Foreign Country* (1985).

These are but a few general possibilities or orientations for research and creative thought which should constitute the core of humanistic geography.

**Epilogue**

In the final analysis, humanism is about the quality of civilization, its habitats, and the human condition. It is not about materialistic, anthropocentric, or egocentric greed—at least not as an ideal. To be sure, like any species, humans are self-serving from the standpoint of survival, but that self-serving characteristic can be guided by what Glacken calls “enlightened anthropocentrism” (1970b, 199), that is, by the desire to make the world a more humane place. Ideas of the humane will not be found in the “intricacies of technique” (Barzun 1961, 149) or in the mechanistic models of physical and social processes and systems that science uncovers (that is not to deny the undoubted contribution of science to the alleviation of suffering from pain). It is unlikely that intellectual constructs, such as idealism, materialism, hermeneutics, deconstructivism, and similar post-modern efforts to mediate between man and the world will reveal them. Traditional societies found values in myth, magic, and religion. Modern, secular and atomized societies find these values, if not in religion and myth, then in literary and artistic humanism, which regards the human being and that “major power of human nature,” imagination (Bachelard 1964, viii), as the mediator between landscapes of the interior, of the soul, and exterior landscapes of human artifice.

For geographers it is the human sense of place and the quality of airs, waters, and places that matter—of buildings and cities, farms and natural landscapes. Ecologic perspectives help with airs and waters, but the making of places has to come from human nature—not an other-directed human nature but one specific to individuals and groups of people. In the geographer’s culture, there is a fondness for models of phenomena, from central place theories to atmospheric systems. But none of these encompass the dynamic model of civilization that Saint-Exupéry thought he was fighting for during the Second World War, a model that resonates with emergent relativistic thought of today. The “model” was “developed” in an unmailed letter to a General X, shortly before Saint-Exupéry’s last mission over France (1986, 137):

I don’t care if I am killed in the war. But what will remain of what I have loved? By that I mean not just people but customs, certain indispensable intonations, a certain spiritual radiance. What will remain of the farmhouse lunch under the olive trees of Provence, or of Handel? The things that endure, damn it. What is valuable is a certain ordering of things. Civilization is an invisible tie, because it has to do not with things but with the invisible ties that join one thing to another in a particular way.

Here, then, is what the humanistic geographer’s work is all about—to express, save, and cultivate the invisible ties that join one thing to another in a particular way, in a particular place, in civilization.

**References**


